

Where Women Didn't Work Out July 17

We proudly remember the cryptologic contributions of women in World War II and after. A number of them are in the Cryptologic Hall of Honor, but there were thousands more women who proudly served their country during the war. Their brilliance, dedication, and day-to-day hard work clearly were a major factor in the cryptologic successes that supported military operations. They were an essential component of victory in the war.

This wasn't the case with our Axis adversaries.

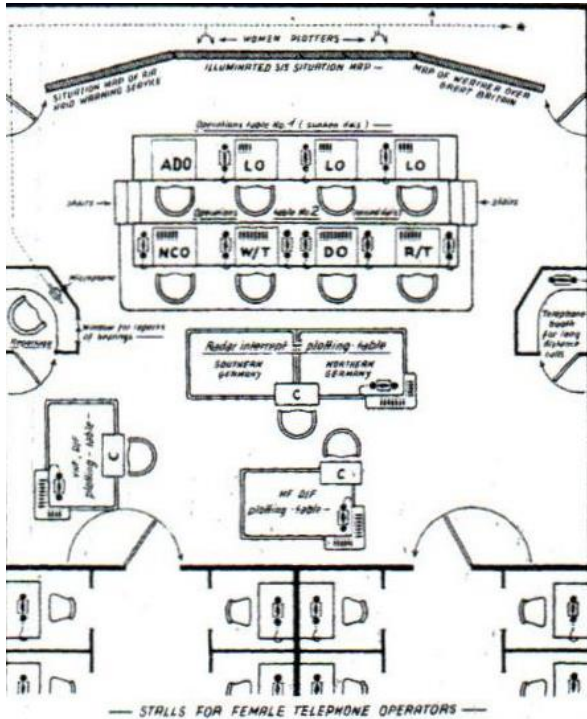
Women were little utilized overall in the German, Japanese, and Italian war efforts. But, we recently came across an old article about the German Air Force Cryptanalytic Bureau (usually referred to as Chi-Stelle) and noted that Chi-Stelle had some women workers. This article is based on a report written after the end of hostilities by Oberleutnant Waldemar Werther, a German prisoner of war (there was a special postwar effort by the U.S. and British cryptologic organizations to collect the memories of enemy cryptologic personnel).

Chi-Stelle was relatively small as the war began in 1939, and its employees were all civilians, although uniformed personnel came in after the war began. Much of the augmentation to the Bureau came by bringing personnel from outstations back to headquarters. As the war went on, women were brought into the work, both at the central headquarters and some of the outstations.

Oberleutnant Werther made general remarks about characteristics to look for in selecting personnel for cryptologic work. He did not recommend women for this kind of work. We quote in full two paragraphs he wrote about this:

“While a man works for the job, a woman works for a person. Her productivity depends, therefore, much more than does the man's, on released sympathetic or antipathetic impulses. The performance of female workers was therefore dependent on the attitude of the chief cryptanalyst, the other military authorities, and the general living conditions.

Though a goodly number of intelligent women and girls showed good average results, working together and particularly living together under war conditions created an atmosphere which could hardly be called serious and intellectual. Undoubtedly, purely male organizations showed better and more substantial results.”



Post-war schematic of a Chi-Stelle operations room

History Today is simply reporting on the skewed attitudes of a German SIGINTer from World War II, so please don't shoot the messenger. We in the Center for Cryptologic History admire and are grateful for the contributions of the thousands of American and British women who worked in SIGINT during the war and after. Our past articles frequently have paid tribute to their brilliance and high achievements.

There were many reasons the Germans lost the war. The fact that they failed to take advantage of a key human resource is one of them.

SOURCE: Oberleutnant Werther's report was reproduced in the *NSA Technical Journal* of April 1959.